

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 16, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A, Proper 15: Romans 11:13–15, 29–32; Psalm 67; Matthew 15:21–28

In Raymond Brown’s *An Introduction to the New Testament*, we learn that “Eighty percent of Mark’s [verses] are reproduced in [Matthew] and 65 percent in Luke.”¹ The relationship between Mark, Matthew, and Luke is known as the “Synoptic Problem.” We get the word from Greek. S-Y-N—not S-I-N—means “with” or “together.” “Optic” is from *optikos*—Greek for “eye.” When you put the three gospels next to each other, you can see that the relationship is written, not oral. How Matthew and Luke use Mark with their other sources allows readers to think about the individual perspective Matthew and Luke bring to their gospels.

In the middle of Mark’s gospel, a blind man is brought to Jesus.² After laying his hands on him and spitting on him, Jesus asks the man, “Do you see anything?”³ The man replies, “I see men; but they look like trees,

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 111.

² Mark 8:22–26.

³ Mark 8:23.

walking.”⁴ Jesus then lays his hands on the man’s eyes and looks “intently”⁵ at him. Then, he was healed. This narrative is only found in Mark, not in Matthew or Luke. And a Jesus, who does not know everything, is entirely unknown to John.

In Matthew, Jesus is “Emmanuel . . . God with us.”⁶ At the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sends his disciples out to the ends of the earth and declares that he will be with them always. Matthew not only includes this story but precedes it with the same narrative that Mark uses. In Mark, it begins with Pharisees—in Matthew, Pharisees, and scribes—coming from Jerusalem to Gennesaret. They ask, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?”⁷ In the end, Jesus concludes, “What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of a human, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a human.”⁸

⁴ Mark 8:24.

⁵ Mark 8:25.

⁶ Matthew 1:23.

⁷ Mark 7:5.

⁸ Mark 7:20–23. I use “human” to translate “anthrōpos” for the RSV’s “man.”

What is coming out of Jesus when he says to the Canaanite woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁹ Her response is not just to kneel, as we heard from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible—in the New Revised, it’s “knelt.” The Greek word here means prostration, that is, “worship.” In the New Testament, worship is always a physical and spiritual action, not just an internal thought or feeling. Jesus has already heard about the condition of her daughter. Prostrate before him, she pleads, “Lord, help me.” Emmanuel’s response, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”¹⁰

The only good thing one can say about this narrative that I've read is a comment made by Joel Marcus in his commentary on the parallel Mark. He points out that the woman is the only person in any of the gospels “who wins an argument with Jesus.”¹¹

What was the source of her faith? I would credit God, even if God's Son weren't entirely with it for the Canaanite woman. I think the love of and from

⁹ Matthew 15:24.

¹⁰ Matthew 15:26.

¹¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 470.

another starts with the gift of life. Whence cometh sin and evil? They are mysteries that have always been with us and that still fight fought for human hearts and souls.

Well before the end of the first century, when Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John wrote, the Christian community was no longer a mostly Jewish Christian community. When they were writing, the boundaries between Christians and Jews probably weren't as complete as one might think.

In the years 386 and 387, John Chrysostom, later bishop of Constantinople, was a priest in Antioch. During this time, he preached eight homilies against Christians, among other things, sharing in Jewish celebrations in their homes and their synagogues. I was not surprised to read no reference to Chrysostom's anti-Judaism in the Episcopal Church's own, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. I was very disappointed to see no reference about this in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

I conclude today with the familiar verses from Paul's praise of love in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect

will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”¹²

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹² 1 Corinthians 13:9–13.